# Preliminary Exam Policy Guidance

**What should units do first?**

The first thing units should do is review the policy. Substantive changes have been made to the policy, especially with regard to the second preliminary exam attempt (if applicable). It is crucial that all faculty and staff understand these updates in order to provide appropriate guidance to doctoral students.

Here is a short checklist of things to do next:

1. Update all doctoral student handbooks to reflect the revised policy. The full policy must now be included in all doctoral student handbooks.
2. Review internal processes to confirm that moving forward, units will be reporting the outcomes of all preliminary exam attempts to their Academic Dean’s Office.
3. Validate that only two attempts of the preliminary exam will be given; must be pass/fail; and will follow the “at least 6 full class weeks” standard for any second attempt. Note the definition of “6 full class weeks” provided in the policy because it differs from six calendar or semester weeks.

**Who can units contact to change the repeatable credit limit of their preliminary exam course?**

Per the revised policy, doctoral students must be registered separately for their first and second preliminary exam attempts, if necessary, within the same semester.

To check on the current course designation, go to <http://campus.fsu.edu/curriculum>, search for the course and click on its number, then click “View” and “Course Information.” If programs need to adjust the repeatable credit limit of their preliminary exam course and/or make their preliminary defense course repeatable in the same semester, then they are asked to contact Sunny Houston ([smhouston@fsu.edu](mailto:smhouston@fsu.edu)) in the Registrar’s Office.

**What happens if the preliminary exam has multiple parts?**

**Scenario 1: Multiple parts, intended to be completed in one semester, pass/fail of each component all revealed at once**

If all portions of the preliminary exam are intended to be completed within one semester/term and the pass/fail outcome is not communicated until all portions are completed, there should be only one course number for the preliminary exam. If a student performs poorly on one part, the committee needs to ascertain whether this constitutes actual failure of this portion and therefore, the preliminary exam, or just a need for revision of that portion. Revisions should be completed within a short timeframe, preferably just a couple of weeks. An example of a revision might be any one of the following (but not all or multiple): integrating additional literature into part of the overall essay; using different statistical analyses and providing new interpretation for one hypothesis; detailing an interview guide that was previously described only in broad terms, etc. If a student fails a revision, then that preliminary exam attempt becomes a failure.

**Scenario 2: Multiple parts, intended to be completed in different semesters, pass/fail of each component revealed before moving on to the next part**

If multiple parts of the preliminary exam need to be completed across multiple semesters/terms, units should first evaluate whether all parts are truly part of the preliminary exam, which determines readiness to move on to candidacy. Some units have included “competency/foundational knowledge” type of assessments that determine whether students have pre-requisite knowledge onto which advanced graduate education will build. Therefore, that part of the preliminary exam is often given one to two years before the rest of the preliminary exam. Some units wish to allow more than two attempts on such an assessment. A simple solution exists. To illustrate, in one department, one of the written portions of the preliminary exam has been removed from the preliminary exam and turned into a zero credit hour, repeatable course that is a pre-requisite to the actual preliminary exam and a program requirement for graduation. That assessment and course should not be called “prelim” or similar to avoid confusion. As that portion of the exam is no longer part of the actual preliminary exam, it no longer falls under the "two attempts" rule and the remaining, actual preliminary exam portions may now fit Scenario 1.

Evaluation of the preliminary exam may show that all portions are truly part of the preliminary exam assessing readiness for admission to candidacy. Typically, passing of each part is required before students move on to the next part. In that case, units will need to create separate course numbers for each part assuring they are titled appropriately (e.g., prelim for methods, prelim for theory, prelim part 1, prelim part 2, etc.). Students will need to enroll in the proper preliminary exam course depending on what part they are completing in each given semester/term. Each part is restricted to two attempts and the outcome of each attempt (pass/fail) needs to be documented on the transcript.

**Assigning incompletes for the preliminary exam?**

Incompletes should only be given under exceptional and limited circumstances (e.g., minor edits or revisions at the end of the semester with an internal deadline after grades are due; call to military duty, etc.).

The preliminary exam course should be used to document the passing or failing of the preliminary exam. A doctoral student should be registered for the preliminary exam during the semester in which they complete the attempt. If the unit knows it will take more than one semester, then the student should not register for the preliminary exam course until the second semester. If this is not anticipated, then an incomplete can be given and later the course registration needs to be moved to the correct semester/term. Leaving the grade in the first semester is not an accurate record as that is not when the preliminary exam was completed.

Note: An incomplete should not sit on a student’s academic record until the semester of graduation.

**What grades can be given for the preliminary exam?**

Only a pass or fail should be given for the preliminary exam.

If a doctoral student fails the preliminary exam, this needs to be accurately recorded on the student’s transcript. Even if a doctoral student fails the first attempt and passes the second attempt, both results need to be present on the transcript. This is necessary for legal reasons and to uphold academic integrity.

**How to handle exception requests regarding the timing of the second preliminary exam attempt?**

Each Academic Dean’s Office is encouraged to create an internal exception request form that doctoral students or supervisory committees can complete if they wish to request an exception regarding the timing of the second preliminary exam attempt. Each Academic Dean’s Office will need to determine under what conditions an exception request would be acceptable for allowing a doctoral student to retake the preliminary exam in a shorter timeframe (less than the 6 full class week’s standard). The form’s language must clearly state that even with the exception, the student has only two attempts total, and that failure of the second attempt triggers dismissal from the program**.**

**When will the revised preliminary exam policy go into effect?**

Implementation begins Summer 2021. The revised policy language will appear in the 2021-2022 Graduate Bulletin.